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New City/County Building
800 French Street
Wilmington
New Castle
Delaware

HABS No. DE-103

P H O T O G R A P H S

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

The New City/County Building

Location: 800 French Street, Wilmington, New Castle County, Delaware

Present Owner: City of Wilmington and New Castle County

Occupant: City of Wilmington and New Castle County

Present Use: Public offices and Council meeting facility

Statement of Significance: Wilmington's City/County Building and its neighbors have set the tone for future development within the City. The building is part of a new Governmental and Civic Center, and an example of the successful implementation of an urban renewal planning program which included private, Federal, State, and local government interests. The City/County Building and its neighbors are an integral unit of the City's long-term downtown renewal program. Present efforts are directed to continuing the cooperation of public and private interests to maintain the unified architectural, economic and policy objectives represented by the City/County Building.

Part I. Historical Information

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection - 1976 cornerstone date.
2. Architect - Vincent G. Kling and Partners, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Whiteside, Moeckel, and Carbonell Associated Architects, Wilmington, Delaware.
3. Builder/contractor/suppliers - Healy, DiSabatino, Joint Construction Managers.
4. Original plans and constructions - Not applicable.
5. Alterations and additions to date - There have been no alterations or additions to the building.

B. Historical Context

Some 50 years after the construction of the Public Building on Rodney Square, Wilmington, like many other northern industrial cities, sought to stem the decline that had slowed business activity, spurred housing deterioration, and discouraged new investment. Determined to reverse this downward trend, the City embarked upon several long-term urban renewal plans that would ultimately make Wilmington a new city. One important phase, the Civic Center Urban Renewal Plan (1965), called for the development of a new government complex which would include buildings for Federal,

State, County, and City offices. Much debate took place over projected expenditures and actual construction plans were delayed for some years. The City and County both had outgrown their facilities at 1000 King Street, however, and there was, once again, the need to consolidate offices that had been dispersed throughout the City. A joint structure was again thought to be the most feasible solution to the problem. With Federal, State, and the local power company (Delmarva Power and Light) commitments to separate buildings in the complex, construction of the City/County Building began in 1975, and City and County offices occupied in the summer of 1977.

Part II Architectural Information

A. Description of Exterior

The new City/County Building is a nine-story masonry rectangular block of steel frame construction. The base of the building is cut out to form a portico entrance on the southern end and a loading dock and service entrance on the northern end. Large tinted square windows intercepted with pilasters divide the mezzanine level into six bays. The shadow cast from the overhanging ledge of the building shaft gives the base weight and plants it firmly on the site. The shaft of the building is incised with bands of tinted ribbon windows. Small slim pilasters bisect the windows at wide intervals. Horizontal bands incised in the building's wall articulate the shaft. The capital of the building is a sheer masonry wall above an open clerestory. The sharp corners and slanted ledges of the building give the effect of crispness. An open masonry and glass annex on the northern side of the building houses the City Council Chambers and Workshop. This annex facilitates access to the underground garage and the neighboring plaza areas.

B. Description of Interior

The southern entrance to the City/County Building leads into the building's large open double lobby area. On the southern side of the lobby, there is an Information Center, the Mail Room, and the City Finance Service Center. The County Treasury Center is located on the northern side of the lobby. Temporary art exhibits, along with the ten-foot sculpture entitled "Sunflower" and a WPA mural which are on permanent exhibit, are displayed throughout the lobby area. Bisecting the lobby is the elevator service core and the mezzanine. Patrons of a lunchroom, "The Sandwich Shoppe," can observe the lobby area over the open ledges of the mezzanine. From the northern lobby, automatic glass doors lead into the annex. Restrooms, the Council Workshop, and the Council Chambers are located within the annex. The Council Chambers is a panelled and

carpeted circular room entered through two sets of double doors. A banister separates the public seating from the Council benches. Doors on the western and northern sides of the annex facilitate access to the plaza area outside. Elevators to the underground garage are also located in the annex. The lobby and annex areas have tiled floors. The high ceilings and large window areas give the impression of great space and openness.

The standard floor plan for the eight stories above the mezzanine allows for four zones surrounding a core which includes elevators, restrooms, zerox and vending machine areas, and stair wells. Offices within the four zones may be arranged to fulfill the needs of individual departments. The offices of the Mayor and County Executive include kitchenettes, showers, and dressing rooms. All office areas are carpeted throughout.

C. Site

The City/County Building is part of a so-called civic center complex which includes four private and public buildings. It faces a northwesterly direction along French Street. The building is physically linked to its northern neighbor, the Elbert N. Carvel State Office Building, by Freedom Plaza; all three are built above a jointly-owned 800-car parking garage, the three levels of which are above grade at the southeastern side of the site. Linkage to the remainder of the urban renewal site is provided by a pedestrian bridge on its southern side which crosses Eighth Street to the plaza of the Radisson Wilmington Hotel and the Customs House Building, a private office building. The Peter Spencer Plaza, on the western side of French Street, is a visual extension of Freedom Plaza and leads to the Federal Building and the Delmarva Power Building. The naming of Freedom and Spencer plazas reflect the site's historical significance. French Street between Eighth and Ninth Streets was the site of the first American church organized by blacks. Peter Spencer, a Delawarean, led a group of black Methodists in withdrawing from their church after it imposed racial segregation, and in founding the new church in 1805. Located in Freedom Plaza is the Holocaust Memorial of Delaware, a bronze and concrete sculpture by Elbert Weinberg.

Part III. Sources of Information

Bibliography

The Evening-Journal, July 23, 1977, June 30, 1977, April 23, 1975, April 15, 1975, (Wilmington, Delaware).

Other Sources

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